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ABSTRACT

In traditional, grammar-oriented second language classrooms, the most common classroom procedure is for the teacher to ask the student a question for which the answer is already known to both. Because no real information is exchanged, this is not a communicative practice. It is alien to the real communicative needs of students, involves no function teaching, teaches no improvisational or creative skills, and does not teach appropriate language usage. To teach communicative competence, information gaps should be used in classroom interaction. This can be assisted by use of "gap" language (heavy use of hypothetical and probability statements, requests for further explanation, restatement of ideas, and "true" questions, asked to gain information), varying ways of asking questions, transforming conventional drills to communicative drills (imaginable situations, guessing games, and true questions), and further transforming these communicative drills, which are structural and quasi-communicative, to communicative activities, which are functional and based on social interaction. In communicative activities, students use the gap language improvisationally and creatively to express communicative functions. Contains 7 references. (MSE)

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Information Gap in Communicative Classrooms

Liao Xiaoqing

I. Information Gap and Non-real Classroom Communication

Communication occurs when the receiver does not already know the information in the sender's message. In other words, there is an information gap, which is filled by the message. In classroom terms, an information gap exercise means that one student or the teacher must be in a position to tell another something that the second student does not know. However, in traditional grammatically-oriented classrooms, "the most common classroom procedure is for the teacher to ask a question for which he already knows the answer, to call on a student to answer the question, to correct or evaluate the reply, and then begin the cycle again" (Ward 1984; see also Barnes 1976; Stubbs 1976). When teaching a new sentence pattern, many teachers often begin with the questions. But these questions have the answers which have already been known to both the teacher and the students, thus having no information gap. For example, in the following classroom exchange, there is no information gap:

Teacher (referring to the book on the desk in front of him):
Where is the book?
Class: The book is on the desk.

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In this exchange, both the sender and the receiver know the information (that the book is on the desk). The question is not a real question and the anwser is not a real answer. There is no information gap and there is no real communication.

One of the most widespread ways of demonstrating the present continuous tense by "situational presentation" is for the teacher to perform an activity like walking to the door (or window) and to say while doing so:

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Teacher: I am walking to the door/window. What am I doing now?
Class: You are walking to the door/window.

In this dialogue, although the teacher has thereby devised a situation which makes the meaning of his sentence plain, the situation at the same time makes his sentence inappropriate in terms of the principle of information gap. Since everyone sees him walking to the door/window, there is no need whatever for him to announce that he is doing these things. The situation would not normally call for such a comment. This practice is also considered non-communicative, as no real information is exchanged.

II. Deficiencies of Non-gap Classroom Activities

The methodologigists of the communicative approach insist that interactional speaking activities used in the classroom should be instances of real communication, based on a genuine information gap. Consequently, they are voilently opposed to such exchange as those above because they are "mechanical" and "artificial" (Richards, 1985: 140) and are not real communication. They argue that this kind of activities are even harmful because may lead the learners away from the use of the language for communicative purposes. This teaching pattern is deficient for four reasons:

First, the non-gap dialogues are found only within classrooms and courtrooms, and are thus alien to real communicative needs of students. Such sentences as "Are you a boy?", "Have you a nose?" or "How many hands have you?" are often regarded as nonsence language because they are rarely heard in real-life situations except in such places as hospitals and courtrooms. So the language used here has been called the "courtroom language" which means that it is used to train lawyers and judges. It has little value in real life situations even if students have mastered it very well.

Second, there is no function-teaching involved since the teacher teaches only the forms and demonstrates meanings of the sentences, that is, they only demonstrate "signification" rather than "value" of the language (Widdowson, 1981:11). This means that by using such dialogues the teachers only make the sentence meaning clear without teaching how they are used appropriately

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in real life situation. We know that language function is not always the same as the form. The question "Why don't you close the door?" may perform the imperative function equaling to "Please close the door". If students have not known the communicative functions of language, they may cause communication breakdown. Chinese students often greet foreign teachers with a Chinese gracious greating "Have you eaten?" because they don't know that this Chinese gracious greeting functions as a real question not as a greeting to native speakers of English, thus making the foreign teachers puzzled and embarrassed.

Third, teachers train no improvisational and creational skills to use language. Douglas Barnes (1976) writes that students must also be given an opportunity to reevaluate and reinterprete what has been presented to them. They must be given an opportunity to talk things over and explore in order to relate the teacher's knowledge to their own world. However, in the teaching pattern, since the question has the one and already-known answer, students lack opportunities to create and improvise the language. As a result, what they do in real life is only to repeat what has learned in classrooms but are unable to create novel sentences, thus communication becomes the echo of previously memorized dialogues. Many Chinese students, seeing a foreign teacher going to the school library, repeated a classroom English sentence: "Are you going to the library?" In this situation they certainly get a response like "Why ask? You have seen me going there! What a stupid question!" from the foreigners although they do not speak it out. Such sentences as "Yesterday I went to the movies", "Last night I met a firend." are regarded as bordering on nonsense because such drills force students to lie.

Finally, in the teaching pattern, the appropriate use of language has not been taught since it teaches no social rules, thus students are able to compose grammatically correct sentences but still unable to use them appropriately in real life situation. Many students often asks for direction in such a way: "Excuse me, kind sir. I wonder if you would be so kind as to direct me to the railway station?", thinking that it is polite, but actually it is still not appropriate. People seldom use such a sentence in real life because it is over-polite (White: 1982).

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III. Improvements of Non-gap Activities

For improvement of non-gap activities in the classrooms, the following teaching technigues are suggested:

1. Try to use the gap language

In the real-life communication, the speakers comment on and/or replay to the ideas being discussed. This exchange of ideas is accomplished by a heavy use of (a) hypothetical statements (*If we do this, then_____)* ; (b) probability statements *(We may/might/ could_____)*; (c) requests for further explanations (*What do you mean? I don't understand)*;(d) restatement of ideas (*What I mean is_____; What you mean to say is_____*), and true questions asked to gain information (Stubbs 1976).

Therefore, in order to reduce or even prevent non-gap dialogues and to make teaching realistic to social life, the teacher should as often use these sentences and the similar expressions as possible: "What do you mean? I can't understand your meaning,please explain. Please sum up what you said. Do you agree? Why or why not?" Thus, students think and use language creatively and improvisationally. More importantly, the teacher should also teach students to use these expressions among students themselves.

2. Vary ways of Asking Questions

Good questions are a way of introducing the information gap, but foolish one prevent the information gap. So try to avoid asking the foolish questions like "Do you sleep everyday?" or "Can you walk?" mentioned above by changing the asking ways: "When do you sleep?" or "Can you walk on the ice?". Also, seeing a student's hair has just been cut, the teacher should not ask: "Have you had your hair cut?" but ask: "When or where have you had your hair cut? " or "How often do you have your hair cut?" thus bridging the information gap.

The teacher in the early stage of an English course might hold up a pen, point to it and say: "This is a pen." Here we have a correct English sentence. But the students know what a pen is as an object. What they do not know is what this object is called in English. So the form of sentence should be really something like: "The English (word) for this is pen. " or "This is (called) a pen in English". We can also teach "This is. . . " with an introduction, saying, "This is so-and-so." "What's this? " can be used to

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identify the name of something in a language: "What's this in English? " or "What's this in Chinese?" and so on.

3. Transform to communicative drills

We have mentioned above the non-gap drills are olny used to demonstrate meanings or drill structures of the sentences. So if the teacher really needs practice of non-gap drills, he should transform them to communicative drills to ensure "the great leap forward" to communication. All the dialogues mentioned at the beginning of this paper can be transformed to communicative drill in the following three forms:

(1) Imaginable drills.

Students learn to gain information in an imaginable situation such as in a street to ask for directions, in a bank to deposit or withdraw money or in a restaurant to oder a meal. For example, after drilling mechanically the sentence patterns "Where is...?" "It is...", the teacher may ask students to imagine a situation in which a person in a street asks a stranger for direction and the stranger gives the answer according to his map:

S1: Excuse me, where is the bank?
S2: It's opposite to the post office.
S1: Excuse me, where is the bookstore?
S2: It's next to the theater.

This exchange contains the information gap because S1 does not know where the bank is before S2 answers. Therefore, it is more realistic to the social life and also has the communicative needs.

(2) Guessing games.

Students gain information by perform guessing activities. For example, by using the pattern " Have you a...?",the students guess what the partner's picture is about. First, the teacher may use many objects(eg. apple, pear, orange) to drill the patern (Have you an apple, pear, orange?) in order to make the meaning and structure clear. Then he immediately changes using pictures to introduce the information gap because students can not see what the pictures are about when their backs are turned to the students. The teaching procedures are as follows. The teacher takes out ten pictures of

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different fruits. After revieving all their names, the teacher puts all of them into a schoolbag, and then asks S1 to the front to pick out a picture, to hold it with its back to the students and to answer other students' questions "Do you have a...?" Then S2 comes up to help S1 and answers "Does he have a...?" Next, S3 helps S1 and S2 and answer questions: "Do they have a...?" Finally comes the pair work: each student draws a fruit and turns it over on the desk and the other guesses what it is by using :"Do you have a...?" until the correct answer is found.

(3) True questions.

One of the currently most popular activities is the substitution drill. The teacher gives a model sentence such as "My father is a doctor," and asks students to construct similar sentences by substituting for "doctor" a series of nouns for different professions. This belongs to the structural practice. But by asking students individually to answer "What's your father?" with the name of their father's real profession, we can come to our goal of using language improvisationally.

As we mentioned above, when teaching the present continuous tense, the teacher often goes to the door, and asks "What am I doing? " and students answer: "You are going to the door". To improve this mechanical drill, we can do like this. After the drill, the teacher may turn to true questions. Suppose the classroon is noisy, he can ask:" What are you doing?" "What are you talking about?" "Why are you not listening?" "What are you laughing at? " Students are required to answer them improvisationally according to their situations, thus real information is exchanged.

4. Transform further to communicative activities

According to Littlewood, communicative drills are not communicative activities, but belong to "pre-communicative activities" which train "part-skills" in order to lay a foundation to perform communicative activities for training of "total skill" of communicative competence. Therefore, pre-communicative drills mentioned above should be transformed to communicative activities to develop communicative competence. His teaching procedures are as follows:

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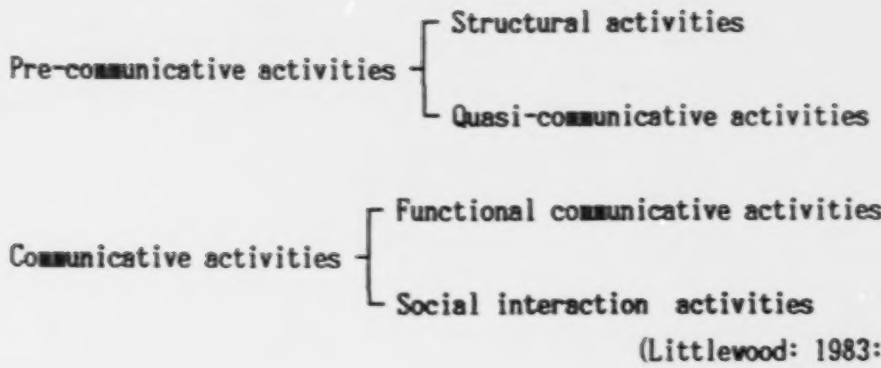

(Littlewood: 1983:86)

As we can see from the diagram, the communicative strategies consist of two stages: pre-communicative stage and communicative stage. The pre-communicative stage is further divided into two periods: structural period and quasi-communicative period. During the structural period, the first period in the first stage, the teacher provides activities that will help students "to produce a certain language form in acceptable activities" (Ibid, 86). During the quasi-communicative period, the teacher "isolates specific elements of knowledge or skill which compose communicative ability, and provides the learners with opportunities to practice them separately". By the time the students finish the first stage of activities, they have developed "partial skills of communication". Now they are ready for the second stage of communicative activities.

The communicative stage is also further divided into two periods: functional communicative period and social interaction period. During the functional communicative period, "the production of linguistic forms becomes subordinate...to the communication of meaning", and the teacher provides such activities as will increase the students' "skill in starting from an intended meaning" (Ibid, 89). During the social interaction period, the second period of the second stage, the teacher requires the students "to go beyond what is neccessary for simply 'getting meaning across', in order to develop greater social acceptability in the language", and this stage "may also involve producing speech which is socially appropriate to specific situations and relations" (Ibid, 86).

Littlewood's communicative activities have two types. One is "functional communicative activity", the goal of which is to complete a task such as

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comparing sets of pictures and noting similarites and differences and solving problems from shared cues. The successful criterion is functional effectiveness. Let's take an ancient Chinese puzzle for example:

> "A man together with a wolf, a goat and some vegetables is standing by a river. He wants to cross the river. But he has a small boat to carry only one of them at a time. The wolf will kill the goat and the goat will eat the vegetables if the man goes away.Decide how the man can get across the river without any of them being damaged."

In this activity, students do not know the answer beforehand so they have to discuss according to the cues. They should also understand and express functions effectively. If a student says "I don't understand your solution", his partner should know that it is a requestion for further explanation and then give a proper response.

Another activity is "social interaction activity" which contains a social context. It includes conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations and improvisations. The successful criterion is appropriate use of language as well as effective expression of functions. Consider the following role-play:

Student A You like dancing and going to discos.Suggest to your partner that you go out this evening . Try to persuade him/her to go where you prefer.

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Student B
You don't like dancing and going to discos. You prefer going to the cinema or to a concert. Try to persuade your partner to go where you prefer.

(White, 1982:21)

In this activity, students not only learn to express functions effectively but also to speak appropriately. For example, when a student refuses his partner's invitation and expresses his own intention, he must consider not only how to say but also what to say in order not to cause offense to his partner.

In a word, during the communicative activities, students use the gap language improvisationally to express communicative functions. They creatively use the language without mechanical recitation of memorized dialogues. They learn to express functions but not only learn structures and meanings. They learn to use language appropriately but not cause offense. They have the information gap to bridge but not ask foolish questions. In this way they really learn to use language for communaction.

IV. Conclusion

Information gap is the essence of communication. Classroom activities without the information gap are "mechanical and artificial". The use of the "non-gap exercises" is only to demonstrate the meaning and drill the structure of the sentence. Traditional way of teaching sentence patterns can be improved by using the "gap language", by varying ways of asking questions, and also by transforming the mechanical drills into communicative drills and activities, thus English is taught as communication. Therefore, ideal classroom instruction, when we are using traditional materials, can be described as one in which each new sentence pattern is first established as an automatic reflex habit by means of pattern practice at the mechanical level (structural practice) and then used as a means of communication (communicative practice).

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